第14話

MY BROTHER JIU, WHO IS SEVEN YEARS OLDER THAN ME, IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND.
BUT EVER SINCE WE WERE CHILDREN, HIS FIGHTING STRENGTH WAS EXTREMELY HIGH.
HE DIDN'T SHOW ANY MERCY JUST BECAUSE WE WERE CHILDREN.
WHETHER I VOMITED BLOOD, OR WHETHER MY BONES BROKE,
HE WOULD HURT ME EVERYDAY.
MY BROTHER'S EYES WERE COLD AS HE FORCED ME TO SURRENDER WITH HIS OVERWHELMING STRENGTH.
HE WAS COMPLETELY STOIC AS HE CARRIED OUT HIS TASK, AS IF IT WAS JUST PART OF HIS OCCUPATION.
I LEARNED TO SHUT OFF THE FEELING OF PAIN.

The ninja world is completely ruled by ability and strength.

For example, even if you're siblings,

you still fight with all your strength in order to become the head

MY WORLD WAS ALWAYS SURROUNDED IN DARKNESS—

NO MATTER HOW MUCH I ASKED FOR HER HELP, OR NO MATTER HOW MANY TEARS I SHOWED HER, SHE WOULD NEVER HELP ME.
GIGGLE
MY OLDER SISTER SAGIRI, WHO IS 6 YEARS OLDER THAN ME, SPECIALIZES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL TACTICS AND ILLUSIONS
SHE LOVES BULLYING ME MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE.
THE MORE I CRIED, THE MORE SHE SEEMED TO ENJOY IT.
I LEARNED TO KILL MY HEART.

BUT AMIDST THAT DARKNESS, CHOUKO WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO WAS MY SUPPORT.
WHO ARE YOU?
CHOUKO IS MY ONLY LIGHT.
ONLY CHOUKO—....
UJOU?
はっ
GASP
!
I'M AT SCHOOL...?
CHOU..KO ...?

WHAT'S WRONG? YOU WERE SPACING OUT.
Are you okay?
A DAYDREAM?
.....IT'S NOTHING
.....
SORRY, I WAS JUST REMEMBERING SOMETHING FROM THE PAST.
sorry
IS THAT SO?
Well it's fine.
HEY UJOU,
ABOUT THAT THING THAT HAPPENED WHEN WE WENT TO THE SEA.....
.....?
WHAT ABOUT IT?
...WHAT SHOULD I DO—

HELP ME, UHOU.....
THE BLOOD WON'T STOP.
MY WOUND FROM THAT TIME STILL HURTS...
!!!?
I WAS WAIT-ING FOR YOU, UHOU.....
CHOUKO ....
IT HURTS SO MUCH.....
I'M IN SO MUCH PAIN.....

I.....!
ARAN- doned ME, didN't you?
YOU'RE WRONG...
I.....!!
But NOW, you
FUFU...

CHOU...
KO...
Hey, look Jiu-nii!
Ujou's crying~
TREMBLE
I ALWAYS GET THE SHIVERS WHEN I SEE UJOU'S TEARS.
TREMBLE
.....
YOU HAVE BAD TASTES AS ALWAYS...

I WONDER IF HE'S ENJOYING HIMSELF—?
AN ILLUSION IN WHICH YOUR OWN MASTER DIES OVER AND OVER AGAIN—
Chouko-san.
Happy birthday!

THANKS EVERYONE!
TO BE ABLE TO INVITE MY FRIENDS OVER LIKE THIS....
IT MAKES ME REALLY HAPPY.
IT'S THE MANAKA FAMILY'S SUCCESSOR'S BIRTHDAY PARTY,
SO I HAVE TO EAT LOTS OF DELICIOUS FOOD BEFORE GOING HOME.
YEAH,
MAKE SURE TO ENJOY YOURSELF.

HE'S STILL NOT HERE....
UJOU...
Please take care of these.
JUST LIKE I THOUGHT, MAYBE SOMETHING HAPPENED..?
CHOUKO.
FATHER.
IT'S BECOME PRETTY LIVELY, HASN'T IT?

I INVITED MY FIRST FRIENDS FROM MIZONOO ACADEMY.
I SEE
THAT'S GOOD, CHOUKO.
IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU. I'M CHOUKO'S FATHER
THANK YOU FOR ALWAYS LOOKING AFTER MY DAUGHTER.
PLEASE BE GOOD FRIENDS WITH HER FROM NOW ON TOO.
THE SAME GOES FOR US.
Hand-some!
OF COURSE!

—AND
JUST LIKE CHOUKO, HE HAS A NATURAL CHARISMA...!
SO THIS PERSON IS THE MANAKA GROUP'S LEADER.
.....
THAT'S THE BLUE CLAN'S HEAD—...
GLARE

AKANE...
SHUDDER
SHUDDER
SHUDDER
JUST LIKE I THOUGHT
HE HAS NO OPENINGS.
DO YOU HAVE THE CONFIDENCE TO WIN AGAINST HIM IF YOU WERE TO CHALLENGE HIM TO A FIGHT?
.....NO.
THROB
THROB
THROB
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TOO...
I WOULD NEVER WANT TO MAKE HIM INTO MY ENEMY...
NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I SIMULATE IT IN MY HEAD,
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE THAT WE'D BE KILLED WITHIN THREE SECONDS.
SO THIS

—IS THE STRONGEST NINJA OF THIS GENERATION.
TOUGOU UKOU....
AH,
HEY TOUGOU.
I HAVEN'T SEEN UJOU AROUND.
DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?
I'M TERRIBLY SORRY,
I HAVE INSTRUCTED SOME DISCIPLINE FOR HIS INSENSITIVITY.
I THINK HE'LL COME RUNNING HERE BEFORE THE PARTY ENDS, BUT...

?
—WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU, [illegible]...?
IF HE DOESN'T, THAT MEANS THAT'S ALL HE'S WORTH.

IT HURTS..... UWOU...
WHY? UWOU...
THIS IS SAGIRI'S ILLUSION....
I KNOW THAT ALREADY IN MY HEAD.
—BUT
YOU'RE MISTAKEN CHOUKO!
DAMN ....!
WEREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME, UWOU?
YOU'RE WRONG...!

SAVE ME, UWOU...
IT HURTS, UWOU...
IT HURTS, UWOU...
?!
WHEN I SEE CHOUKO COLLAPSING IN FRONT OF MY OWN EYES,
MY ENTIRE BODY FREEZES, AND I CAN'T STAND BACK UP NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY...
PLEASE STOP...
I DON'T WANT TO SEE CHOUKO SUFFER
ANY-MORE...

I TOLD HER THAT I WOULD GO NO MATTER WHAT.
I SWORE THAT I WOULD BECOME HER AIDE.
THAT I WOULD ALWAYS STAY BY HER SIDE.
GASP
は、
CLENCH
I CAN'T!
I CAN'T FAIL HERE...!!
FAIL IN A PLACE LIKE THIS!!
I CAN'T...
I NEED...
I NEED AN OPEN-ING...
KNOW...

THIS PAIN AND HURT I'M IN,
IT'S ALL...
I RESENT YOU.
?!
IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT, UNOH!!
OH MY?

WAS HIS MIND UNABLE TO WITHSTAND THE PRESSURE?
SO HE WAS DEFEATED, HUH.....
I WANTED TO PLAY WITH HIM A LITTLE MORE, BUT I GUESS IT CAN'T BE HELPED.
What a shame
SHALL WE TIE HIM UP AND THROW HIM INTO THE DUNGEONS?
コクッ
NOD
.....
SHOCK
!
WHOOSH
SAGIRI, IN FRONT OF YOU!!
EH?

BAM
WHA—!
BAM
GUUH!

DON'T MOVE, JIU!
PAUSE
?!
TURN
SAGIRI...
YOU UNDER-ESTIMATED CHOUKO.
MY ILLUSION WAS DIS-PELLED...?!
WHY....
HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY CAPTURED YET ...
WH.... AT?

THE ONE FROM YOUR ILLUSIONS...
THAT'S NOT MY CHOUKO.
I'LL TEACH YOU.
CHOUKO... MY MASTER—
EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS TO LOSE HER LIFE BECAUSE MY STRENGTH HAD FAILED—
—SHE WOULD NEVER BLAME ME.

SHE'S A MUCH STRONGER PERSON THAN I AM.
SO SHE WOULD TRY TO PLACE THE BLAME ON HERSELF INSTEAD.
ON THE CONTRARY, SHE WOULD THINK THAT I WOULD BE SELF-REPROACHING MYSELF
BUT....
IF SHE WAS LIKE THE CHOUKO FROM THE ILLUSION,
LETTING HERSELF BE PROTECTED BY ME AND PLACING THE BLAME ON ME—
IT WOULD BE SO MUCH EASIER...
BECAUSE CHOUKO WON'T LET ME PROTECT HER, NOT EVEN A LITTLE BIT.
A MASTER'S JOB IS TO PROTECT THEIR UNDERLINGS!
IF I EVER HAVE TO TAKE REVENGE BECAUSE MY FRIENDS WERE HURT
I'LL DO IT WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS.

THE HEAD OF THE BLUE CLAN CAN CONTROL THE ENTIRE CLAN WITH A SINGLE WORD.
.....
—BUT
THE MASTER WHO ACCOMPANIES THE HEAD OF THE BLUE CLAN MUST ALSO BE SOMEONE WHO'S SUPERIOR IN SOCIETY.
BUT WITH THAT STRENGTH AND THAT INFLUENCE, THEY'LL BE CONSTANTLY TARGETED.
PROTECT HER LIFE AND HEART!
THAT'S WHY I WANT TO STAY BY CHOUKO'S SIDE AND
SOMEONE'S AIDE?
DO YOU ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE HEAD OF THE BLUE CLAN TO BECOME
...UJOU.
.....

YOUR MASTER WILL BE PUT INTO EVEN MORE DANGER THAN EVER.
BECAUSE YOU'RE HER AIDE
WHO WILL BECOME YOUR WEAK POINT, MORE THAN ON YOU.
THAT DANGER WILL BEFALL ON YOUR MASTER,
.....
YOU'RE STILL TOO WEAK!
UJOU...
...THAT'S—

WHOOSH
CLANG

I...
STARTLE
...!
DO YOU THINK THAT I HAVEN'T REFLECTED AT ALL
SINCE THE DAY I FAILED TO PROTECT CHOUKO?
...YOU'RE RIGHT.
JUST LIKE YOU SAID, CHOUKO WILL BECOME MY WEAK POINT.

FATHER SAID THAT
I WAS DISQUALIFIED FROM BECOMING A NINJA
WITH A MASTER.
SO WHAT'S THE RIGHT SOLUTION?
THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE.
THAT'S SOMETHING COMMON FOR ANY NINJA WHO HAS A MASTER.
JUST LOOK AT FATHER.
IF TOUCHED, THEY WILL UNLEASH THE DRAGON'S RAGE.
THEY CALL IT THE "IMPERIAL WRATH."
HIS MASTER IS NOT HIS "WEAK POINT"
BUT SOMETHING UNTOUCHABLE..

IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH THAT,
I NEED TO LEARN TO DEMONSTRATE THAT OVERWHELMING STRENGTH.
NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, I MUST NOT SHOW MY WEAKNESS.
IT'S TRUE THAT I MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN READY.....
STAYING BY CHOUKO'S SIDE BRINGS ME SO MUCH HAPPINESS.
I WAS SCARED OF LOSING THAT.
BUT IN ORDER TO NOT LOSE THAT, THE STRONG WILL TO PROTECT ONE'S MASTER—
—AND DETERMINATION IS NECESSARY....

INHALE
GET OUT OF THE WAY.

JIU.
.....
THE NINJA WORLD IS COMPLETELY RULED BY ABILITY AND STRENGTH.
THE ONES WHO HAVE TRUE STRENGTH RISE ABOVE THE OTHERS.
THE NEXT HEAD IS GOING TO BE ME, NOT YOU JIU.
IN OTHER WORDS...
IF I FOUGHT AGAINST YOU SERIOUSLY,
I WOULD BE STRONGER THAN YOU.

I'LL KILL MY OWN BROTHER IF IT MEANS I CAN RETURN TO CHOUKO'S SIDE.
UJOU!
.....
Sigh...
GET OUT OF THE WAY.

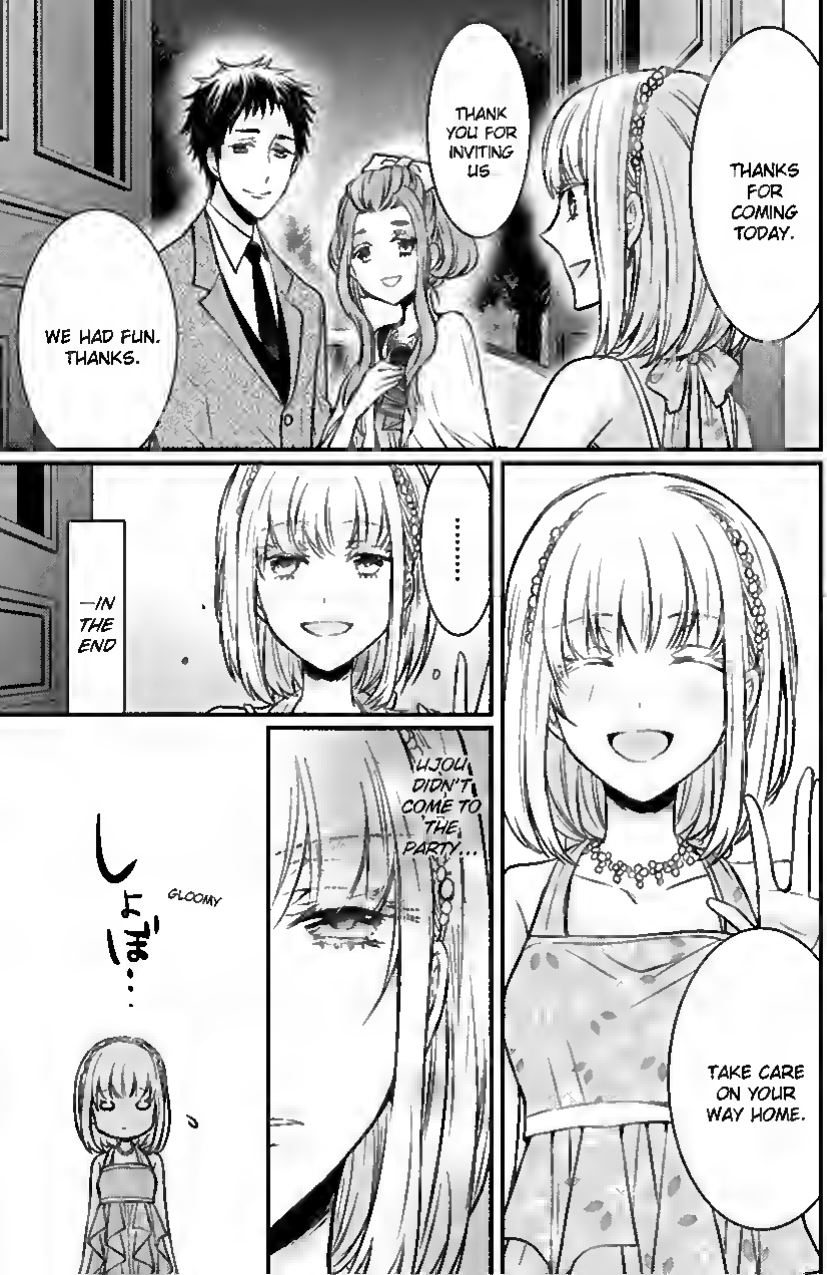
Bo-rrrr
Tch...
and I was having so much fun playing with Ujou.
SAGIRI.
IT'S A SHAME, BUT OUR PLAYTIME WITH UJOU IS OVER
CLINK
....I SUR-RENDER
.....
PLAY-TIME
DO YOU WANT TO BECOME THE HEAD THAT BADLY?
DO YOU BOTH HATE ME THAT MUCH?
BOTH JIU AND SAGIRI....

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY HATE?
?
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
…?
WE LOVE YOU UJOU, YOU KNOW?
….YEAH.
RIGHT? JIU-NII.
what was that just now

EVEN THOUGH WE'VE BEEN SO LOVING TOWARDS YOU?!
!
DID YOU THINK JIU-NII AND I HATED YOU ALL THIS TIME?!
HUH?!
SHOCK
WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY....?
HA? LOVI...
AH—! I DON'T WANT TO BE TOLD THAT BY YOU, JIU-NII.
IT'S BECAUSE SAGIRI'S AFFECTION IS DISTORTED.....
THAT'S WHY HE GREW UP STRONGER THAN OTHERS.
I ALSO BROKE ALL OF HIS BONES CLEANLY.
...I ALWAYS MADE SURE THAT HE WOULDN'T DIE FROM HIS INJURIES.
THERE'S A LIMIT TO EVERYTHING, DON'T YOU KNOW?
...I DIDN'T HOLD BACK ON MY STRENGTH FOR UJOU'S SAKE.
YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW HOW TO CONTROL YOUR STRENGTH!
YOU WOULD ALWAYS BEAT UJOU UP WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN

HEY— ALL IT TAKES IS A LITTLE BIT OF THINKING TO UNDERSTAND.
???
WAH—... YOU'RE SO KIND, JIJI-NII. (SARCASTIC)
WE DON'T NEED THE POSITION OF THE HEAD OF THE BLUE CLAN.
YOU ALREADY KNOW UJOU.
I'M ALREADY MARRIED TO SOMEONE AND LIVING IN A SEPARATE HOUSE
MY MASTER IS JUST AN AVERAGE COMPANY EMPLOYEE,
SO BECOMING THE HEAD OF THE BLUE CLAN WOULD ACTUALLY BE A HINDRANCE.
ぽかーん…
DUMBFOUNDED
To be honest I was really relieved
when it was decided that you would become the next head
☆

I DON'T THINK HE EVER PLANNED ON TAKING AWAY YOUR POSITION AS THE NEXT HEAD.
To be honest Father really spoils you for some reason.
.....
コクン
NODS
ALL FATHER TOLD US
WAS TO PLAY WITH YOU LIGHTLY SINCE YOU WERE GETTING CARRIED AWAY
AND LOSING YOUR ENERGY, RIGHT?
DAMN OLD MAN—!!!!
....THAT


THANKS FOR COMING TODAY.
THANK YOU FOR INVITING US
WE HAD FUN. THANKS.
TAKE CARE ON YOUR WAY HOME.
UJOU DIDN'T COME TO THE PARTY...
GLOOMY
しょぼ...
—IN THE END
……

ガサ
RUSTLE
ガサ
RUSTLE
THIS SUCKS...
I'M... A LITTLE BIT DISAPPOINTED.
SHOCK
CHOUKO!
FWUUSH
KYAA AAA!!
?

UJOU?!
GASP
!
BAM
haa
haa
SIZZLE
AAH, IT'S ENDING IN ABOUT 15 MINUTES.
HUH?
GRABS
CHOUKO!
WHAT ABOUT YOUR BIRTHDAY PARTY?!

HAA...
I MADE IT IN TIME...
PHEW
.....
DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?
WHAT WERE YOU DOING UP UNTIL NOW?
WHAT HAPPENED?
YOU'RE ALL BEAT UP
I'LL PROTECT YOU NO MATTER WHAT, CHOUKO.
I WON'T LOSE ANYMORE, SO

.....?
THAT'S NOT WHAT I ASKED. WHAT....
WHAT?
HE'S MAKING A REALLY RELIEVED EXPRESSION FOR SOME REASON...
?
はっ
GASP
THAT'S RIGHT!

I WAS SUPER LATE AND I DIDN'T EVEN BRING A PRES-ENT....
IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY, YET
I'M SORRY CHOUKO! I WAS BUSY WITH SOME-THING—
—SO I COULDN'T PREPARE A PRESENT FOR YOU!
DEPRESSED
キャーん
I'M SORRY....

I THINK YOU ALREADY KNOW THIS, BUT MY FAMILY IS SU-PER RICH!
SIGH
YOU KNOW,
IF THERE'S SOME-THING I WANT, I USUALLY GET IT RIGHT AWAY.
FOR A DAUGH-TER OF A HIGH-CLASS FAMILY LIKE ME,
I FIND THE FEELINGS IN-VESTED INTO AN OBJECT MORE VALU-ABLE THAN THE OBJECT ITSELF.
THAT'S WHY.....

COME ON.
HURRY UP AND GIVE ME MY PRESENT.
I TOLD YOU, I DON'T HAVE A PRESENT...
.....?
YOU'RE WRONG.
NOT AN OBJECT. DON'T YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY TO ME?
.....

I...
DON'T BELIEVE IN UNCERTAIN THINGS SUCH AS FATE OR GOD, BUT—
—FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART... I'M GRATEFUL TO THE MIRACLE THAT
LET ME MEET YOU, CHOUKO.
EVER SINCE MEETING YOU, I...
EVERY DAY IS FILLED WITH HAPPINESS.
WHAT AN EXAGGERATION
IT'S NOT AN EXAGGERATION, IT'S THE TRUTH.
CHOUKO.

HAPPY BIRTH-DAY.

THANKS.

第14話 終

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